

Fashion and the cutting-edge of Classicism

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It's not often that Classicists have an excuse to read *Vogue* and call it 'research', but recently, we have had several opportunities to follow fashion for homework. Carpe Diem! For classical antiquity is currently hotter than Vesuvius in AD 79. From Kate Moss in gladiator sandals to J Lo in her Michael Kors 'goddess' dress, Greek and Roman costume has been having a huge influence on modern designers and their celebrity mannequins. With the Olympics returning home to Greece, and several Hollywood blockbusters attempting to repeat the colossal success of *Gladiator*, the classical world has been dusted off and reinvented for the new millennium. Because of its role as a visual embodiment of the *zeitgeist*, fashion has welcomed the ancient into the new with open arms. And not just on the catwalks. Today, in almost any women's high street fashion store, you can find toga-inspired dresses, draped tops and thong sandals to help you put together that Parthenon-pediment look. The trend hasn't quite filtered through to menswear yet, but give it time and I'm sure we'll see David Beckham in a one-shouldered *chlamys* (he has already adopted the gladiator look for a Pepsi ad...).

Fashion always goes in cycles, and the influence of Classicism is by no means a new phenomenon. While very little evidence of actual garments survives from ancient Greece, womenswear designers have often taken inspiration from sculptures and vase-paintings. Artistic representations are not always the best guide to what the ancient Greeks really wore (they are stylised or fantasised versions of ancient dress), but they transmit a sartorial vocabulary which can then be reinterpreted in yet another creative twist by modern designers.

In the Museums

Two recent exhibitions have explored the influence of Greek forms of dress upon later fashions. In 2003, the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York held *Goddess: The Classical Mode*, a display of ancient art and the modern designs it has inspired. In Athens, the Benaki Museum held Greece's first major international fashion exhibition, timed to coincide with the Olympic Games. This included examples of classical art, folk costume, haute couture and *prêt-à-porter* which employ *ptychoseis* ('folds and pleats').

Greek forms of dress, relying upon the drapery of cloth around the body, are moulded to the female shape. When they suggest or reveal the undulating form of the body beneath the fabric, they flatter by skimming over flesh, rather than constricting it. Unlike later forms of female dress in Europe, which relied upon corsetry, they do not seek to shape and control the body, but to define – and therefore celebrate – its natural shape. It is for this reason that classical costumes have cyclically come into fashion when more restrictive forms of dress have been rejected. The late eighteenth century saw a move away from corseted waists and enhanced hips in favour of the simple elegance of the high-waisted empire line, which allowed dresses to skim over the body in simple columnar folds which perfectly complemented the Greek forms of Neoclassicism. The sculpted forms of the classical female body were alluded to in a rather risqué fashion at this time by a *drapé mouillé* (or 'wet look drapery') effect created by the dampening of muslin gowns to reveal the body

beneath rather more clearly than Austen-style chaperones might have liked... Again, in the early twentieth century, with the emancipation of women, came a rejection of restrictive forms of dress based upon the corset, and a corresponding interest in linear forms of drapery and softly-moulded pleats, which allowed more freedom of movement. The pleated silk 'Delphos' dress designed by Mariano Fortuny in 1907, for example, specifically recalls the *chiton* of the bronze charioteer from Delphi, in a figure-hugging yet fluid shape which was popular with the dancer Isadora Duncan (who would later be tragically killed when her flowing himation-style scarf was trapped in the wheels of her car).

The Classical aesthetic, as reinterpreted in Western culture, is characterised by a sense of balance and restraint, combined with an idealisation of natural form. Gracefulness and the idealisation of natural forms are the lifeblood of fashion, so it is not surprising that Classicism is periodically adopted by designers seeking to inject timeless elegance, and yet a sense of modernity, into their creations. Notice, for instance, the delicate drapery of a dress designed by Madame Grès in the 1940s. Redolent of the columnar folds of classical costumes such as the *peploi* worn by the Caryatids on the Erechtheion, the garment simultaneously projects a simple elegance which was made possible by the twentieth century invention of a thin jersey silk. Each time Classical forms come back into fashion, they are therefore reinvented in accordance with the aesthetic trends and popular materials of the day.

On the Catwalk

So how is Classicism reinterpreted today? Since the 1980s, the most creative use of drapery in modern dress has come from avant-garde Japanese designers such as Issey Miyake. For Miyake, folds and pleats are an inventive reworking of his own sartorial heritage, in which traditional forms of costume using a single piece of cloth are deconstructed, pleated with modern heat-sealing processes and then shaped around the body as an entirely contemporary, fluid silhouette. This bold and creative attitude to the forms of the past has been influential upon modern designers seeking to reinterpret the 'Classical Mode'.

The most exciting practitioner of the New Classicism is the fast-rising designer Sophia Kokosalaki, a young Greek who graduated in fashion design in 1998 from the prestigious London art college St. Martin's (which also produced John Galliano, Alexander McQueen and Stella McCartney). Born and brought up in Athens, but trained in London, Kokosalaki combines her Greek cultural heritage with an originality and subversiveness which also has its roots in British tradition. Like Vivienne Westwood or Galliano, she is not afraid to look to history for inspiration, and then to break the rules, presenting what she calls 'a retrospective look at the future' which blends the Classical and the futuristic, or the romantic peasant with the rebellious punk.

On the basis of her recent collections, Kokosalaki has been dubbed 'Queen of the Drape', and is now a byword for the Grecian goddess look (her designs were included in both the New York and Athens exhibitions). Yet rather than adopting the

long lines which inspired earlier designers (the Delphi charioteers' columnar folds), Kokosalaki alludes to iconographical traditions in ancient art which speak much more appealingly to contemporary women. These are the short draped tunic-dresses of Artemis and the Amazons, which suggest youthfulness, ease of movement, grace and power. We find none of the clichés of classical costume here – no togas, no 'Cleopatra' dresses à la Elizabeth Taylor (for these, see the campy glitz of Versace – more Caesar's Palace than Parthenon). There is both a strength and delicacy to Kokosalaki's garments, which gently flatter the female form (with a nod to *drapé mouillé*), while eschewing the glitzy embellishments and flesh-baring tactics employed by more sensationalist designers. The colour palette she favours is one of bleached earthy hues, whites, muted grey and flesh tones. Soft, fluid fabrics such as cotton, chiffon and multi-pleat jersey are draped, ruched and twisted in a reworking of Classical styles, yet combined with razor-sharp tailoring and inventive detailing, so that the familiar forms of the Greek past are subverted by a rebellious sense of modernity. The Classical aesthetic is thus twisted, knotted, unbalanced, while still retaining its elegance of line and graceful proportions.

At the Olympics

This combination, in fact, was perfect for the opening and closing ceremonies of the 2004 Olympic Games, for which Kokosalaki was commissioned to design six thousand costumes. Fittingly, these games were a celebration of both the traditional and contemporary aspects of Greek culture. This was the year the Games came home, a chance for Greece to show the world the glories of its cultural heritage, but also an opportunity to prove, in the face of all expectations to the contrary, that Greece is a modern European state. This blend of elements was dramatically symbolised in the opening ceremony – a sculptural spectacle which celebrated the artistic achievements of the Greek past by harnessing the most astounding effects of light, sound and movement which can be created by modern technology. Kokosalaki's costumes were an embodiment of these ideals – garments based on traditional Greek dress, over white and flesh-toned asymmetric body-suits which incorporated drapes and sculpted twists of fabric. These subtle allusions to Classicism revealed the human form in a manner which evoked the celebration of the body so intrinsic to ancient Greek culture, while also alluding to the modern cult of athleticism which is its legacy. Like Kokosalaki's fashion collections, they reinterpreted the past with a bold sense of the new; Athena, goddess of craft, textiles and technology, would have been proud of her young citizen's achievement.

With such talent, it is no surprise that Kokosalaki showed her most recent collection in Paris, rather than London, and is being touted as the next womenswear designer for Givenchy. Her influence on high street fashion means that she has also been commissioned to design a capsule range for Top Shop, so that even underpaid Classicists now have an opportunity to wear her elegant re-workings of the Greek aesthetic. Enjoy the moment while you can – the fickle twists of modern culture mean that fashion's new take on Classicism will soon pass. Meanwhile, the latest version of Amazon chic sure beats Xena, Warrior Princess in the style stakes...

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